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Understanding the Divorce Cycle

Growing up in a divorced family leads to a variety of difficulties for adult offspring in their own partnerships. One of the best known and most powerful is the divorce cycle, the transmission of divorce from one generation to the next. This book draws on two national social survey data sets to examine how the divorce cycle has transformed family life in contemporary America. Compared to people from intact families, the children of divorce are more likely to marry as teenagers but less likely to wed overall. They are more likely to marry other people from divorced families, more likely to dissolve second and third marriages, and less likely to marry their live-in partners. Yet some of the adverse consequences of parental divorce have abated even as divorce itself has proliferated and become more socially accepted. Taken together, these findings show how parental divorce is a strong force in people's lives and society as a whole.

Nicholas Wolfinger is an assistant professor at the University of Utah. He is the co-editor of the book *Fragile Families and the Marriage Agenda*. He has published widely in journals such as *Demography*, *Social Forces*, and *Journal of Family Issues*. He is the recipient of the University of Utah's Superior Research Award, 2004.

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UNDERSTANDING THE DIVORCE CYCLE

*The Children of Divorce in Their
Own Marriages*

Nicholas H. Wolfinger
University of Utah



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Preface

When I started researching the marriage and cohabitation behavior of the adult children of divorce, I was a novice in the study of marital breakdown. I grew up in Berkeley, where divorce abounds, but there had been only one divorce in my parents' extensive friendship network. Because the children lived across the street and were my close friends, that one break-up should have affected me, but our skateboarding and family picnicking continued pretty much as before. I was aware that my maternal great-grandmother divorced four times, but my mother always told that story as part of a portrait of Great-Grandma Goodman's exceptional independence, modernity, and colorfulness. (One of her marriages allegedly was to a hereditary nobleman.) I never heard any hint of the trauma my grandmother and great-aunts suffered. My first real exposure to people's thoughts and feelings about marital dissolution came when I mentioned to friends, acquaintances, and strangers on airplanes that I study divorce, and listened to the outpouring of their questions and recollections.

Many people view divorce as unfortunate but sometimes necessary. There are segments of the American population, however, who have intense feelings about it. Some people applaud the availability of divorce, regarding it as a basic freedom, while others deplore it. Each group has its political advocates. In the last fifteen years, more than thirty state legislatures have deliberated legislation that would toughen divorce laws; language urging reconsideration of no-fault divorce appeared in the 2000 Republican Party platform. Even among academics who study divorce, there are some who believe it inflicts little or no harm on children, while others regard it as a source of deep and lasting trauma.

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PREFACE

A seminal finding in the scholarly research on families is that divorce seems to be transmissible, and cycles through the generations. First identified in the 1930s, the cycling of divorce has been amply documented by Paul Amato, Larry Bumpass, Norval Glenn, and other distinguished scholars. The crux of the idea is that the family structure of origin powerfully affects marriage formation and marital stability in the adult offspring of divorce. Put simply, the children of divorce are more likely to end their own marriages than are people from intact families. Thus the more children a given divorced couple have, the greater the number of divorces expected in the next generation. With each generation, the number of divorces in that family potentially increases. The astonishing proliferation of divorce in America over the last forty years (with corresponding increases in other Western countries) has become a major social issue.

Many of the findings reported in this book help to flesh out the by-products of the divorce cycle. For example, adult children of divorce (ACDs) are more likely to marry other children of divorce, thereby significantly increasing their probability of divorcing. ACDs are also more likely to avoid marriage altogether. Those who experience multiple disruptions while growing up often dissolve multiple marriages as adults. Lest the reader begin to anticipate that this work is but a lengthy discourse on the perils of divorce, there is a mitigating factor. Early on in my research, I found that since the early 1970s, a growing number of adult children of divorce have succeeded in throwing off the influence of their parents' marital dissolution by creating enduring unions for themselves. (I discuss this slowing of the divorce cycle in Chapter 5.)

Were I to trace here the influence of my great-grandmother's tendency to divorce on successive generations in my family, it would look like an anecdote about the ebb and flow of divorce in twentieth-century America. (My father, a political scientist, is fond of saying that the plural of 'anecdote' is 'data'.) It is my hope that the negative consequences of divorce will continue to abate in the new millennium.

Acknowledgments

This book culminates a decade of research on the long-term consequences of divorce. Throughout these years I enjoyed intellectual and emotional sustenance from many friends and colleagues.

Paul Amato stayed the course, commenting on multiple drafts of the manuscript. Mary Ann Mason was always available for deliberation and support. William Mason, my mentor and dissertation advisor, has been the single greatest influence on my practice of quantitative research. But for the ongoing encouragement and aid of Paul M. Sniderman, this book might have been stillborn.

Lori Kowaleski-Jones, Matthew McKeever, and Andrew Roth deserve special recognition for commenting on manuscript drafts, in addition to providing every conceivable form of professional assistance. My academic career has been enriched by these three friends and colleagues.

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